

NEGATION--ITS EXPRESSION IN PAINTING AND ASSEMBLAGE

by

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A corner of the studio.



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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the following paper is to personally investigate the application of negation to art. Negation is the absence of (i.e., a void) and also opposition to a positive. Negation can have many meanings when applied to painting and assemblage. For clarity I have divided the following discussion into four areas which pertain to negations in art.

1. Negation as a philosophy of perception.
2. Negation in the creative process with particular reference to subject matter.
3. Negative art or non-art.
4. Negative-positive form.

It is the candidate's belief that this may be the first written attempt to bring together areas of the artist's concern in terms of negation. It should be said that it is often very difficult to verbalize that which is visual and meant to be felt; therefore the indulgence of the reader may be required. The author has used his own words whenever possible; however, the candidate is an artist rather than a writer and therefore when he found statements which were particularly meaningful he did not hesitate to quote them directly.

A PHILOSOPHY OF PERCEPTION

Let us begin our involvement with negation through an exploration of the artist's perception. I have found in existential and oriental philosophy profound and related thoughts concerning the artist's perception of time and his environment. I believe this will provide a valid point of departure for a meaningful investigation of negation in painting and assemblage. How does one perceive the world he wishes to express through an art-object? It is this perception which will provide insight into the process and the motives of the creative artist.

The existentialist is constantly aware of negation within the perception of the present. This is particularly evident if we do not forget the temporal senses of the present moment. The present moment, in which a world containing things and other people surrounds us, is penetrated by the future which is not yet and torn from the past which is no more. Thus the present, which traditionally has been taken as the real and actual point of time, is essentially constituted by two negatives. Therefore the positive reality of the present is what it is through the negative of the future and the past which penetrate it. Moreover, the world as it presents itself is always indefinite and finite; and however far we may extend our horizons, beyond it there is always nothing. The existentialist projects the world against a background of nothingness. We ourselves are a human project within nothingness. The following passage by Arturo Fallico from his book, Art and Existentialism, vividly portrays

this condition:

Nature's own peculiar indifference attends our formation and expulsion from the womb: a man may be conceived through negligence, rape, marriage, artificial insemination--"nature" cares not how. Once he has come into existence, the reason and necessity for the occurrence is nowhere to be found. Who would miss a man not born? What would the world be missing without him? No mathematical calculation, no rational argument can give foundation to individual existence. It is such that one can only stare it in the face like an appearance out of nowhere, without reason. A man remains a stranger, estranged from the world, yet inextricably bound with it. An existing individual has no substitutes--he is irreplaceable, unheard of, an intruder into being. He stands alone, in an aloneness which is irremediable. With respect to his existence, he stands as the single witness to a grave event--on his testimony everything depends as if at some amazing trial. The account he gives of himself can be given only through the ambiguity that constitutes him as a being. The possibility of self-deception is for him, not a choice like other choices, but an ineradicable possibility of his being. With him, untruthfulness about himself has the intruding power of the dread to be his own freedom.¹

The void of nothing is therefore essentially involved with and internal to the human project of perceiving the world. The nothing is not empty space outside the universe but a possibility within human existence itself. One can quote the poet Holderlin from The Night of the World - "the night from which all the gods have departed and where the god to be has not yet been born; the night in which man must stand in somber and lucid courage before nothingness".² Nothingness is not a meaningless word, not a mere negative concept, but a very real historical and philosophical problem that man faces now as never before in history. The capturing of the present moment which the artist

¹Arturo B. Fallico, Art and Existentialism, p. 59.

²William Barrett, What is Existentialism, p. 132.

perceives is certain to be a challenging problem. In addition it is also a most exciting one. It cannot be viewed fragmentarily. It must be seen whole. Ideally the time and the space of the art-object should be internal to it, cast once and for all in a profound form that the physical object of perception could never obtain.

In oriental perception we also find expression of the void as in the following excerpt from Taoism and the way of life:

The Way is a void
Used but never filled:
An abyss it is,
Like an ancestor
From which all things come.

It blunts sharpness
Resolves tangles;
It tempers light.
Subdues turmoil.

A deep pool it is
Never to run dry!
Whose offspring it may be
I do not know.³

There is much for the artist to learn from contemplation and pursuit of the void as revealed through oriental mysticism. A shadow is to the object which cast it as the object itself is to its eternal idea. Through contemplation the work of art transcends the subject-object dualism. The artist loses himself in the subject until he has divested himself of all restraint from the subject and object; spontaneously he then creates his painting. Further, the contemplator of the work of art is to repeat this process of dwelling with the work until he loses himself as

³Lao Tzu, The Way of Life, p. 56.

contemplator, until he is no longer a subjective consciousness perceiving an object, until the unity of being is no longer shattered by the artificial distinction between the subject and the form or object it takes.

Normally our perceptions are geared to our actions. We scarcely look at things, we are satisfied to simply identify them. To have total perception one must detach himself from his self-interest and see a thing for itself rather than for himself.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Negation in the creative process might be called a "spontaneous-deliberate approach" to the creative act. Negation being the absence of something, in this case referring to the absence of preconceived subject matter or subjective element, as one creates. Thus the artist can create spontaneously while deliberately avoiding the subjective until the last stages of creativity, if even then. In this way the artist works with form and color unburdened by a preconceived subject. This can allow for a much greater range of emotion if it be locked unexplored within the relationships of the artist's mind, heart, and his materials of expression. In its purest sense it is like working in a void where the only reality is that which is created by the art-object itself. The what or essence of the art-object is a free essence, founded on the free or unpremeditated act of the subject-creator, born out of spontaneity itself. As an

essence, it is no part of any system of essences, either of the "real" world or conceptually deduced world. It stands as witness to the presence of spontaneous and free being in the midst of a world which resists and limits it. The radical freedom upon which it rests and to which it refers is such that this object itself does not depend for its being on any system of cohering objects of its own kind. Each work of art is unique, unpredictable, and unrelated to any other.⁴

One has only to look at a contemporary painter such as Robert Motherwell to find an example of the spontaneous-deliberate approach. The following excerpt is from a review of Motherwell's work by Natalie Edgar. "He lets one shape choose the next going from an egg to a splatter, jumping to a far off corner for a block of color, filling in the background, but leaving some white to come through as a template for a shape already there. The ultimate design stays unknown until the last link in the chain of associations completes it."⁵ Feeling and imagination are joined in such a way that the image is felt and the feeling is imagined, and our encounter with the created object is more like the encounter with a person than with a thing. A dialogue of a kind, a certain mutuality of self-disclosure is made possible.

It is the decreased role of the subjective element which is

⁴Fallico, op. cit., p. 24.

⁵Natalie Edgar, "The Satisfactions of Robert Motherwell." Art News, October, 1965, p. 38.

significant in this concept of the creative process. In abstract expressionism and action painting we find the presentation of naturalistic objects nonexistent. The act of creating similar to the spontaneous-deliberate approach previously described becomes the gateway to the "authentic being" of the created work. It should be here stated that the spontaneous-deliberate approach requires discipline. It is neither a discipline of the same materials nor former techniques of the old masters. It is a discipline of mood and atmosphere in the creative act. The following statement points out the dangers when this discipline is missing:

The strenuous "existential" mood and atmosphere of crisis which characterize action painting are as difficult to sustain as they are to pass on to a younger generation whose sense of urgency is compromised by the changed and more congenial circumstances of the progressive artist in America today. Quite appropriately, too, the younger artist finds himself preoccupied with technical matters, for his painting problem in the beginning is to command the expressive means, to acquire artistic culture rather than unload it. It is small wonder, then that members of the pioneering generation now cast occasional anxious glances over their shoulders, for they see their drama of struggle and doubt parodied in the quick aptitude and mannered facility of their imitators, and their own moral earnestness translated into the careless paganism of youth.⁶

In continuation let us now investigate the role of subject matter in the art of assemblage. One might believe that assemblage is the antithesis of abstract painting in the use of subject matter. This, however, is not necessarily true. This artist prefers to work in assemblage with a spontaneous-

⁶Hebert Read, Art Since 1945, p. 271.

deliberate approach similar to painting. The assembler gathers together a number of prefunctioning materials and arranges and juxtapositions them into a new reality. I do not start with a subject when assembling. I start with a family of objects and materials which I feel to be rich in form and esthetic content. I then attempt to create a dialogue or mutuality of self-disclosure which directs the use and combination of the objects in the finished work. Perhaps in assemblage it is even more difficult to create the necessary void in which artist and material have intercourse free from preconceived subject matter. In many instances objects used by the assembler have acquired a surface subject identity which challenges the artist's insight. Even a specially selected but unmodified piece of driftwood announces personal spontaneous existence. It has been chosen by some sensitive, feeling, and imaginative person, giving it the stamp of personality. Thus it is transformed into a felt image. Discriminating selection marks it as a product of spontaneity, lifting it out of the realm of mere things and giving it character and universality.⁷

Optical art generally requires preconception and intellectualization prior to the creation of the work of art. The physical part of the creative act is merely one of following the preconceived plan. However, it would seem that the spontaneous-deliberate approach to creativity could possibly operate in the manipulation of the elements which form the preplan for an

⁷Fallico, op.cit., p. 30.

optical art work. The optical artist's goals of penetrating the conscious and communicating on a feeling level are in harmony with those of the spontaneous-deliberate artist.

The pop artist makes use of the most common and popular symbols. However, it would seem that the pop artist's very selective choice of symbol and its removal from context again announces the personal spontaneous existence of a new reality for that symbol. It should also be noted that the pop artist uses form, color, line, and shape in the autonomous and often painterly manner of the abstractionist. Here again it seems that even though the creative process is not specifically the same as it is for the spontaneous-deliberate creator, the goals are harmonious.

NEGATIVE ART

In the context of this writing negative art or non-art is a general title which refers more to the spirit of a school of art rather than a specific way of working. I suppose if one were seeking a contemporary father of non-art he might choose Dadaism whose spirit was pure nihilism, a negation of all standards, conventions, and established traditions of logic. Or perhaps Futurism with its declared manifesto in absolute opposition to much of the art of the past. In truth it seems that the nature of the creative artist is to continuously work away from the positive or accepted and probe into the negative or unaccepted. William Seitz in writing about assemblage art states:

The challenge presented to the plastic arts by the new wave of assemblage should not be evaded, but surely pseudo innovation should never be embraced because it seems to be the thing to do. Yet the need of certain artists to defy and obliterate accepted categories, to fabricate aggressive objects, to present subjects tabooed by accepted standards, to undermine the striving for permanency by using soiled, valueless, and fragile materials, and even to present ordinary objects for examination unaltered--these manifestations are signs of vitality. They once more demonstrate the necessity for artists to flee the current circle of approval while seeking recognition on another level, to return again from abstraction to nature, to work with the materials of life rather than art.

Those who decry such developments as dishonest or deplorable, as evidence of commercialism, capitulation to jaded fashion, moral decay, or worse--and such views are held by many who are not stubborn conservatives who reject venturesome art--should be heard. On the opposite side--though who can honestly declare himself to be entirely in one camp or the other?--lies an unqualified faith in the purity of the regenerative human activity of art no matter where it may lead. Somewhere between these opposed prejudices lies the realization, supported by history, that Western art is, has always been, and should continue in a state of ferment and constant redefinition. And it must be recognized with approval and pleasure that in addition to enriching and adulterating the themes and forms of painting and sculpture, makers of assembled art have wrought a truly magical transformation: from banality and ugliness, dispersion and waste, tawdriness and commercialism, they have created challenging, meaningful, and often beautiful objects ordered by principles inseparable from this century.⁸

The regenerative aspect of art that Seitz mentions is certainly a most interesting one. Abstract expressionism began as an intense rejection of the shallow eclecticism of a provincial art culture. However, it produced the climate for a dynamic new way of looking at color, and form. The radical new painting taught a whole generation in America how to "think"

⁸William Seitz, The Art of Assemblage, p. 92.

directly in paint. The abstract expressionist adventure resumes a repeated pattern in the progress of modern art: an isolated experimental venture, initiated by a few stubborn and nonconforming individualists, has acquired a programmatic value and become the basis of a widely accepted method of working.

Periods of nihilism are as necessary for the continued vitality of the arts as are periods in which the past is revered and emulated.

However, no enterprise is more exposed to the challenge of conservative thinkers than that of changing method in thought itself. Here the difference between the intrepid and the brazen, the wise and the foolish, the new and the merely novel is often slender. Today's world is full of attempts at modernisms; some only pretentious, stemming from egotistical strivings for the sensational; others which are honest attempts at more contemporary approaches. Much experimentation in the fine arts is a threshing about to find new rules for playing the same old game, or fresh meanings for worn-out terms. Actually, most significant changes are less conscious than that; they are simple, straightforward reactions of a contemporary spirit to its own time. Few individuals are truly contemporary in spirit. To be fully contemporary requires qualities of sensitivity, discernment, character, and energy infrequently found in one person. When such persons do exist we often find their creations difficult to understand.⁹

⁹Richard Guggenheimer, Creative Vision, p. 36.

NEGATIVE-POSITIVE FORM

There are many concepts of negative form and at this point I will attempt to survey several which have influenced this artist. The concern for the negative form surrounding the positive form in the art-object seems to be a relatively new concept of seeing whole. The background or backdrop concept of form ignores the relationships between the positive and negative.

Ad Reinhardt who seems to be the pioneer of "quietistic" painting is working with extreme negation. The following is a description by Reinhardt of his own work:

A square (neutral, shapeless) canvas, five feet wide, five feet high, as high as a man, as wide as a man's outstretched arms (not large, not small, sizeless), trisected (no composition), one horizontal form negating one vertical form (formless, no top, no bottom, directionless), three (more or less) dark (lightless) noncontrasting (colorless) colors, brushwork brushed out to remove brushwork, a mat, flat, freehand painted surface (glossless, textureless, nonlinear, no hard edge, no soft edge) which does not reflect its surroundings--a pure, abstract, nonobjective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested painting--an object that is self-conscious (no unconsciousness), ideal, transcendent,¹⁰ aware of no thing but art (absolutely no anti-art).¹⁰

One would have to agree with William Seitz when he says however disinterested Reinhardt's paintings were intended it is easy to associate these large paintings with religious and mystical states. The contemplation of nothingness, which they invite while retaining their identity, quickly goes beyond purely visual sensation.¹¹

¹⁰Dorothy C. Miller, Americans 1963, p. 80.

¹¹William Seitz, The Responsive Eye, p. 17.

Other artists such as Clifford Still and Mark Rothko play on resonant color sensations which make contact with a transcendental reality, a sphere of otherness beyond the self. In Still's work there is an elaboration of "biomorphic" shapes and empty areas of negative space that evoke the nullities, voids, and general mood of negation in Dada. In Rothko's paintings we see flat color masses which can be read, alternately as forward plane or negative void.

Hans Hofmann makes the following statement concerning form relationships:

Basic forms are positive space volumes; negative space is created through the opposition of these positive space volumes. Positive space is life-fulfilled--negative space is force-impelled. Both exist simultaneously--both condition each other--neither is conceivable without the other. Only the simultaneous existence of positive and negative space creates a plastic unity.¹²

When discussing painting, Hofmann states that "form must be balanced by space", that form and space must "exist together in a three-dimensional unity", he could be talking of sculpture, or even of space in nature. But when he concludes that spatial unity is represented by "the two-dimensional unity of the pictureplane", another medium and aesthetic realm has been entered; space and flatness must exist simultaneously, and consequently in tension.¹³

Another painter which this writer finds interesting in the use of positive-negative form relationships is Jack Youngerman.

¹²William Seitz, Hans Hofmann, p. 30.

¹³Ibid., p. 30.

Youngerman has drawn some inspiration from the Lascaux paintings. The Lascaux cave paintings are of course flat in approach and spontaneous in attack. The forms themselves--the large, open shapes of bison, cow, bird, or man, executed in two or three colors (often black, or red-orange, those most frequently present in Youngerman's own work)--seem to be reflected in many of the paintings and drawings completed after Youngerman's visit to Lascaux. The positive-negative, figure and ground exchanges which are the most invariable occurrence in Youngerman's work are embodied in some of the most celebrated of all cave work, the stenciled renderings which the artists made of their own hands.¹⁴

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this writing has been to investigate the application of negation to art. It seems to this writer that the artist's involvement with negation in today's world would be difficult to escape. As stated in my philosophy of perception--"Nothingness is not a meaningless word, a mere negative concept, but a real historical and philosophical problem that man faces now as never before in history". Increasingly, man concerns himself with the "void of nothing". The scientists send their missiles deep into the void of space not knowing what

¹⁴Michael Benedikt, "Youngerman: Liberty in Limits." Art News, September, 1965, p. 55.

they will find. The moralists cry, "God is dead, what shall take his place?" These questions are encountered in the artist's involvement with negation in perception, creativity, and form.

Each man is the single witness to his own existence and the only account he gives of himself can be given through the ambiguity that constitutes him as a being. The artist who offers witness through his visual image, in reality, then has no judge except the searching depths of his heart.

DISCUSSION AND PRESENTATION OF THESIS WORKS

The paintings and assemblage presented on the following pages were executed by the candidate during the course of the research and writing of this thesis. The candidate's work reflects an environment in which human and natural forces work with and in opposition to one another. He has endeavored to interpret this environment through the abstraction of personal symbols and forms which evolve during the spontaneous-deliberate act of creating painting and assemblage.

Often the candidate finds stimulation for his painting through his work with assemblage. As a result some of the works become combines of both assemblage and painting. Through assemblage this artist finds the reflection of contemporary man's world. What objects does he choose to make? How are they used? Why are they discarded? How are they discarded? In addition the artist often finds that man's unending conflict with time

and the natural elements can be uncovered and explored through assemblage-art.

Usually the candidate works in the manner described in this paper as spontaneous-deliberate; that is, without preconceived subject matter. If, however, as a work progresses a conscious subjective element begins to be felt by the artist in personal response to the work--it may be reflected in the culmination of creativity and the titling of the work.

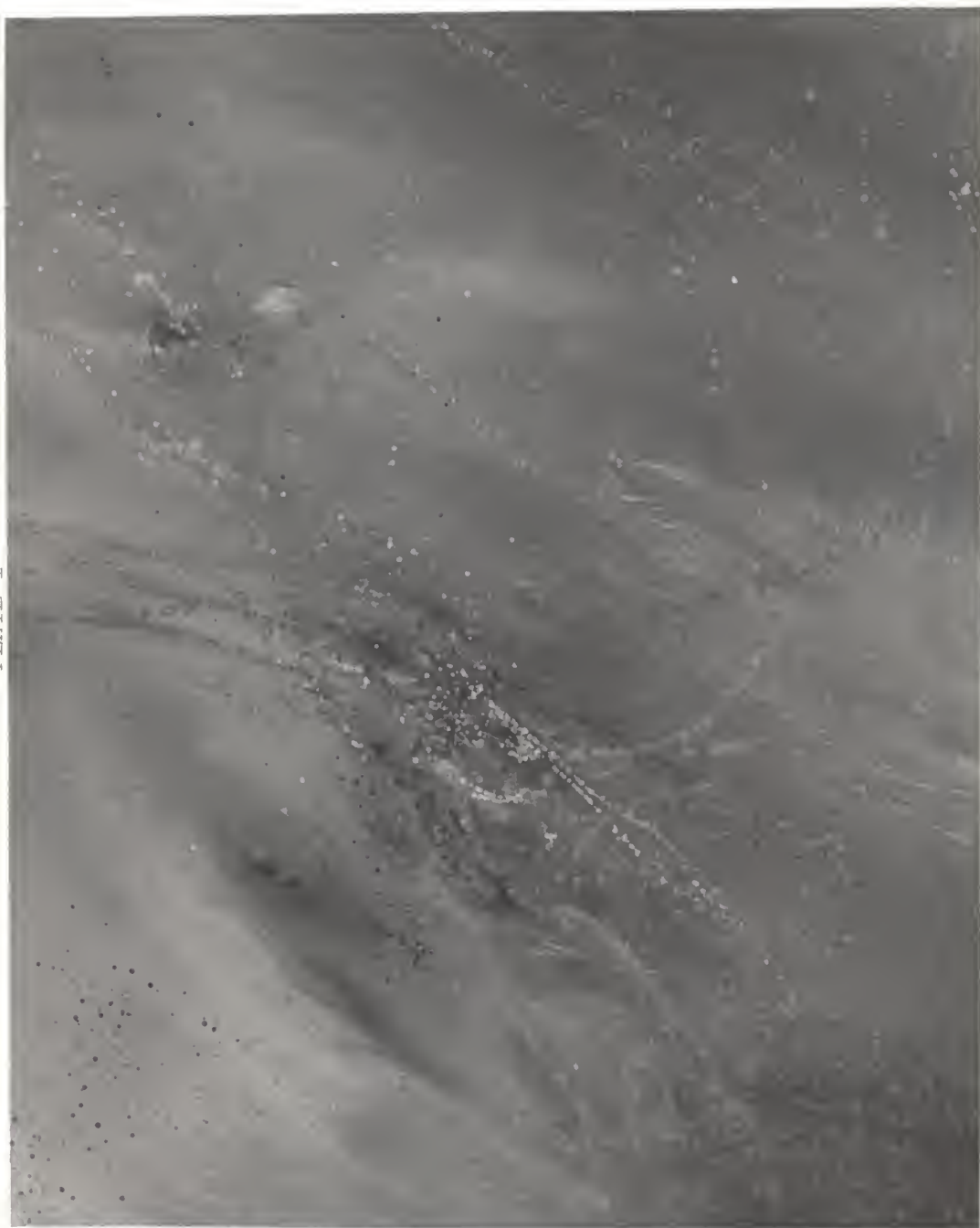
The candidate does not consciously seek to tie one work to the next. However, a deep concern with personal existence and the forces which work upon it would seem to provide a spiritual basis for the painting and assemblage presented.

EXPLANATION OF PLATE I

"Voyage"

(oil, 53" x 65")

PLATE I



EXPLANATION OF PLATE II

"Internal Scape"

(oil, 35" x 39")

PLATE II



EXPLANATION OF PLATE III

"Michelle"

(Assemblage, 22" x 28")

PLATE III



EXPLANATION OF PLATE IV

"Detail of the Consummation Cycle"

(oil, 30" x 40")

PLATE IV



EXPLANATION OF PLATE V

"Coming Out for the Kansas City Game"

(Oil and paper, 31" x 34")

PLATE V



EXPLANATION OF PLATE VI

"Between--Formed or Unformed, Existing or not
Existing, Missed or not Missed"

(Assemblage, 40" x 24")

PLATE VI



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The author wishes to express his sincere appreciation to Professor Gerald W. Deibler, of the Department of Art, for his invaluable assistance in the preparation of this thesis.

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This thesis is conceived as a personal investigation of certain applications and relationships of negation to art. It is an attempt to bring together areas of the artist's concern in terms of negation. The written portion discusses the application of negation to: the artist's perception, creativity, mode of expression, and form.

How does the artist perceive existence, time, and purpose? Based on existential and oriental philosophy, the paper outlines a theory of perception which embodies negation as a way of seeing and perceiving one's world. The conclusion reached is that the positive reality of the present is what it is through the negative of the future and of the past which penetrate it. Moreover, the world as it presents itself is always both indefinite and finite; and however far we may extend our horizons, beyond it there is always the "void of nothing". Today, as never before, man is questioning himself through his concern with the "void of nothing". The scientists send their missiles deep into the void of space not knowing what new questions they will encounter or answers they will discover. The moralists cry, "God is dead; what shall take his place?" These questions are encountered in the artist's concept of negation in perception.

The thesis continues on to trace a "spontaneous-deliberate" approach to creativity. By negating preconceived subject matter, the artist may find new and vital abstraction evolving from the spontaneous dialogue between the subconscious and his medium of expression.

The spirit of nihilism as an inherent aspect of art is investigated. Periods of nihilism are then found to be as necessary for the continued vitality of the arts as are periods in which the past is revered and emulated.

Included in the writing is an examination of various positive-negative form relationships followed by a discussion of the thesis works and their photographic presentation.

In concluding the thesis the writer makes the following statement:

Each man is the single witness to his own existence and the only account he gives of himself can be that given through the ambiguity which constitutes him as a being. The artist who offers witness through his visual image, in reality, then, has no judge except the searching depths of his heart.